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Literary Betrayal: (de)voicing the marginal in Roberto Arlt's *El juguete rabioso*

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Introduction

Arlt's *El juguete rabioso* is a novel set in the incipient modernity of Buenos Aires in the 1910s and 1920s. It tells of the attempt by the author-protagonist Silvio Astier to 'be someone', to stand out from this impersonal urban space and its cacophony of marginal voices, which dominate the narrative, most notably the lower classes, criminals, and various immigrant communities. It is also a novel which has itself long been regarded as one of the first to bring together and attempt to portray such a range of discourses, laying down a challenge to the contemporary literary establishment in its readiness to incorporate these marginal voices into the novel form, to give these marginal communities a voice within mainstream high culture.

The aim of this paper is to show that by allowing the implications of the novel's *narrative* to inform our reading of the novel as a *literary project*, we are led to a radical reappraisal of the traditional view of the effects of the novel's incorporation of marginal voices, a reappraisal which in fact questions the ability of *any* literary work to relate to reality in a way which does not falsify and betray its multifarious discourses.

El juguete rabioso: Silvio's quest

Sixteen-year-old Silvio's world — the world of the novel — is the anonymous, sprawling, repressive city of Buenos Aires. As Rita Gnutzmann, writing in the critical edition of the novel, says, a place of

'monotony and mediocrity' (38).¹ It is a space populated in the novel by characters from a host of marginal groups: Jews, Italians, Germans, and other immigrant communities, criminal gangs, women, the working classes, even a transvestite figure. Silvio himself comes from an impoverished single parent family, and his summary of his own circumstances as his 'ínfima condición social' (172) serves as a more than adequate summary of just about all the characters encountered in the novel.

Presented as an autobiographical novel written by the fictional protagonist himself, the narrative concerns Silvio's attempt to escape his marginal social status in this impersonal urban space. And it is a quest centred around mainstream high culture, predominantly in the form of literature. The novel is replete with references to the books, novels, and poetry which have formed a central part of Silvio's formative years. We are told, for example, how: 'cuando tenía catorce años me inició en los deleites y afanes de la literatura bandoleresca un viejo zapatero andaluz' (87). And Silvio's thoughts frequently turn to romantic literary characters such as the bandit 'el admirable Rocambole' (91) and the 'singulares doncellas' (89) of romantic fiction. The world of literature is constantly referred to as a *vida linda* (for example, 88), with its bandit heroes enjoying a high prestige and social status — all very different from Silvio's life in the margins, a life of 'ultrajes [...], humillaciones [...], angustias' (157), described simply as an 'infierno' (139).

Concomitant with this comparison of the life lived by literary heroes and antiheroes and life as lived in contemporary urban reality, Silvio is also portrayed throughout as finding it easier to express himself and his feelings with the language of literature and art. Introspective and unwilling to express himself in any meaningful way to his friends and family, he sees the language of song, poetry and novels as speaking for him. Talking of his feelings for his ex-girlfriend Eleonora, he describes how he wishes he could have told her what he wanted to tell her 'así con la música del "Kiss-me"' (108), and later sees his feelings for her encapsulated in lines from a poem by Baudelaire (117). Yet the fact is

¹ All references and page numbers correspond, unless otherwise stated, to the critical edition: Roberto Arlt, *El juguete rabioso*, ed. Rita Gnutzmann, 3rd edition ([1926], Madrid: Cátedra, 1995).

that this expression through the language of these art forms is not realised: in reality he said none of these things to Eleonora.

It is with this desire for expression in the language of art forms and the concomitant binary of life-in-art and life-in-reality evident throughout the novel that, I suggest, one is to understand the attempts by Silvio to escape his marginal status.² There are three main attempts of which we are told, with all three being based precisely around Silvio seeing art, and, most notably, representation in art, as the 'way out': the way to elevate himself above his marginal status and 'be someone'.

First, he forms a band of thieves with two friends, the *Club de los caballeros de la medianoche*, and it is made clear that this is, fundamentally, an attempt to become like the renowned literary antiheroes and bandits to which Silvio refers so often. Following this, we are told of Silvio's unsuccessful attempt to burn down the bookshop where he works. The motive behind this act is clear as Silvio wonders: '¿Qué pintor hará el cuadro del dependiente dormido, que en sueños sonríe porque ha incendiado la ladronera de su amo?' (159). And finally, in the third episode, we read of Silvio's attempted suicide, where, again, the underlying motives are clear, Silvio stating that: 'la teatricalidad que secunda con lutos el catafalco de un suicida, me había seducido con su prestigio' (192). Yet all three attempts fail. The Club disbands when the risk of being found out and sent to prison, rather than to the pages of a famous novel, becomes too great; the burning coal left by Silvio on some paper in the bookshop is put out by some dirty dishwater; and the gun he uses to try to kill himself fails to go off, and he merely faints.

Finally, though, the end of the novel appears to record a success for Silvio. Having been asked by his very good friend El Rengo to help in stealing a large amount of money from the safe of the engineer for whom El Rengo's girlfriend works as his maid, Silvio decides to betray his friend, goes to the house of the engineer and informs him of the plot. El Rengo, 'el hombre más noble que he conocido' (227), is arrested. And Silvio, now infamous in the community as a betrayer of one of his own, leaves the city, moving to the South, from where he is

² Aden W. Hayes, 'Reality and the Novel — The Case of Roberto Arlt', *Romance Notes*, 21 (1980), 48–53 on how this literature/reality dichotomy is a constant in Arlt's work.

figured as writing the confessional autobiography which we have just finished reading.

So, quite how and why is this dénouement seen as a success? Like the previous attempts at escaping his marginality, the betrayal of El Rengo is also inextricably linked to becoming, or being represented in, art, as a sort of infamous romantic literary antihero. When the idea to betray El Rengo first occurs to Silvio, he talks to himself once more of his literary hero Rocambole's betrayals (227), and, most significantly, he repeatedly envisages himself as being 'como Judas Iscariote' (227), that is, the ultimate literary antihero and betrayer. Moreover, when he attempts to 'explain' to the engineer the reasons why he betrayed his best friend, as well as appealing to a Gospel-like style and model, as Rufinelli has noted,³ he, tellingly, peppers his discourse with the refrain 'la Vida es linda' (238), associated from the beginning with literary lives, as we have seen.

Most crucially of all, in this respect, and the way in which this attempt can be seen to 'succeed', is the fact that the end result of this act of betrayal is the writing of this novel, that is, the creation of Silvio as literary antihero, now outside of his marginal space in the city. With his passing from being an unheard individual in a society of marginal communities to being a literary character *à la* Judas Iscariot, he seems finally to have succeeded in realising what he earlier described as his 'deseo infinito de inmortalizar[me] con el nombre de delincuentes' (97), both to die and not to die, 'Yo no he de morir... pero tengo que matarme' (192), and to have achieved it through precisely the sublimation in art, specifically in literature, which he has perceived as being the only 'way out' of his social condition all along.

The question is then: why does he succeed here where he failed with his previous three attempts at 'being someone'? I would suggest the answer lies, at an intellectual level, in the type of transgression involved. Both the betrayal of El Rengo and the previous three episodes involved some sort of crime, and the way in which these crimes were seen as enabling Silvio to gain representation *in* an art form or *as* a work of art. But the betrayal of El Rengo, unlike theft, arson and suicide, is not a crime against the law. That is, it is not a crime which

³ Jorge Rufinelli, 'Art: complicidad y traición de clase', *Escritura: teoría y crítica literarias* 6:12 (1981), 375-405 (p. 398).

fits into the judicial structures of society. Rather, it is an act which remains inexplicable: Silvio himself talks of how he will ask himself over and over in the future why he was such a rat, and that he will not be able to give himself an answer (227). It is, I would suggest, a transgression of what, in Lacanian thought, has been described as the non-legislative Law 'which underlie[s] all social relations'.⁴ By breaking it, Silvio removes himself from that society, played out in the novel in his figured move to the South, where he is outside of all the social ties of the city.⁵

In short, then, Silvio succeeds here where he has failed before precisely because his betrayal of El Rengo is wholly a move into the literary in his 'recreation' as an Argentine Judas Iscariot and, concomitantly, wholly a move outside of the structures and logic of the society in which he is a marginalised figure. The only way for this marginalised character to 'be someone', to gain a voice or be represented, it seems, is to be removed from his society. Representation in literature and a continued existence as a marginal character are revealed as mutually exclusive.

Of course, what this nevertheless leads one to ask is quite how Silvio's fate at the end of the novel *can* be deemed a success, since, in effect, in opening himself up to the world, in gaining a voice in the literary artefact we are reading, he has also, paradoxically, closed himself off from it. How, then, are we to read this *dénouement*?

The answer lies, I would suggest, precisely in the notion of Silvio's opening himself up. For an essential part of this episode of betrayal which closes the novel is the revealing by Silvio of his 'crime', of what he has done, along with the sheer lack of motives he has for his action. It is a 'revealing' which takes place both when he visits the engineer after El Rengo's arrest and — most critically — in the telling of his story, of his self, in the novel before us. In other words, the ultimate secret which is revealed by Silvio, is the secret of Silvio himself, a sort

⁴ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 98.

⁵ In this respect, it is also worth noting that 'el Sur', outside of the city and the place from which Silvio's story (the novel) is figured as having been written, is described by Silvio in highly romantic, literary terms as 'allá donde hay hielos y nubes... y grandes montañas' (238).

of betrayal of himself. This is what is implied by the fact that Silvio's betrayal of El Rengo is a betrayal of 'one of his own', of someone from his own marginal community, a thief, and a friend, someone very much like Silvio in his days in the band of thieves. In short, I would suggest that it is this self-betrayal and an opening up of the secrets of the self, which lie at the heart of Silvio's act of betrayal, and that it is this aspect to which we must look in order to understand the processes involved in Silvio's move from a marginal social figure to his voicing and recreation as a literary antihero.

In his book *The Gift of Death*,⁶ Derrida discusses the relationship between Abraham and God, and talks of the moment when Abraham's family ask him to explain why he is about to kill Isaac, his son, an act as inexplicable as Silvio's betrayal of El Rengo. In the course of his discussion, Derrida suggests that the self (in this case Abraham) exists as a singularity, closed off in a secret relationship of absolute responsibility towards the Other (in this case, God), which is figured as that which grounds the self. In this schema, the notion of speaking, of explaining oneself, that is, of telling the secret of oneself, thus assumes immense potency. It represents a breaking of that responsibility, leading the self into the world beyond, and out of its solitude in that: 'as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses [...] [one's] singularity.'⁷ In short, the previously secret, closed off self becomes communitarian in language.

Yet Derrida simultaneously emphasises that the true secret which founds the singularity of the self-in-relation-with-the-Other is one which cannot be revealed, stating that: 'To share a secret is not to know or to reveal *the* secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined.'⁸ Thus, what Derrida is saying is that the essence of the self as singularity is something which not even the self can determine, just as Abraham is described as simply not understanding why he must kill Isaac. Crucially, then, by talking, by sharing *a* secret, the secret of the self-in-relation-with-the-Other is lost altogether — made even more secret — as the self enters language, becoming *communitarian*, thus

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago/London, UCP, 1995), ch. 3 and 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80, italics mine.

breaking apart its essential, singular relationship with the Other. In other words, in losing its singularity, it loses the essence of its 'self'.

This, I would suggest, is exactly what is at stake in *El juguete rabioso*, with Silvio often being portrayed in the novel as just such a 'singularity', closed off in debate with his 'conscience'/imagined 'God' figure. Unlike Abraham, Silvio, of course, does reveal his secrets, does tell of himself, of his reasons, both to the engineer and to the wider public in the writing of a confessional autobiography (the novel). Yet, though talking, revealing himself, he cannot reveal why, cannot explain the obligation he felt to the Other which made him betray El Rengo, for, as we have seen, he himself cannot explain his decision to betray his friend. To use Derrida's terminology, he cannot determine his essential secret. What is more, the effects of his revealing his secrets are precisely those suggested by Derrida.

Silvio states that, when he is infamous, 'yo, ya no me pertenec[er]ía a mí mismo para nunca jamás' (227), echoing Derrida's affirmation that 'once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique'.⁹ And this is indeed what happens. Entering into language, he is converted into common currency: a signifier, a name, passed around, whispered, exchanged in the gossip of the community, just as the book in which his story is written is also an object to be exchanged, bought, and sold.

Furthermore, as Derrida's schema of the secret implies, it is paradoxically precisely in becoming public property that the singularity which *is* Silvio is in fact lost, is no more. Silvio sees that, in revealing the secrets of his 'self', 'guardaré un secreto' (227). Yet, in being revealed in language, he not only keeps, but becomes a secret, condemned to be forever hidden, irrecoverable. In effect, a split takes place between 'Silvio'-the-signifier and Silvio-the-signified, the former hiding the latter. Silvio-the-signified, that is, the essence of Silvio, is lost, as, desiring to be a literary character, modelling himself on literary archetypes, Silvio is subsumed by precisely that archetype. The fact that both he and the engineer refer to him as 'Judas Iscariote' and the titling of the last chapter of the novel as 'Judas Iscariote' suggest that Silvio's fate will be to be remembered not as 'Silvio Astier', but as the ultimate literary anti-hero. What is more, it is a split and a subsumption dramatised by the novel itself: being merely a character in a book by

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

Arlt, there is, of course, no signified Silvio. In this way, the dénouement of *El juguete rabioso* shows literature to be not just a sublime space where immortality, here in the form of infamy, is achieved, or where a marginal character is given a voice and 'becomes someone', but one where the immortality and representation thus offered the individual are swallowed up in and by the world of literature. Read through Derrida's paradoxical notion of the secret, the gaining of a voice by Silvio in *El juguete rabioso* is thus shown to be an ethical minefield, as literature is revealed as silencing and homogenising that which it apparently vocalises and authentically '(re)presents', rendering Silvio's 'victory' — like his name — quite literally hollow.

El juguete rabioso: Arlt's literary project

As I suggested at the outset, then, we can now see how the reading of the novel's narrative extends further than a reappraisal of (the success of) *El juguete rabioso* as the autobiographical sublimation of Silvio Astier.

Arlt's novel has traditionally been lauded for opening up to and presenting the diverse and multi-discourse urban reality of Buenos Aires in the 1910s and 1920s, with critics focusing on the heterogeneity of marginalised urban voices and characters given space within the novel.¹⁰ The text is replete with *lunfardo*, the slang of Buenos Aires, the Andaluz dialect of the cobbler, the Italianised Spanish and Germanicised Spanish of different immigrant communities, and many other 'voices' previously excluded from the world of the novel, including much direct speech from, for example, the first homosexual transvestite to be given such a space in the Argentine novel.

Yet the narrative's treatment of the *topoi* of betrayal and secrets calls, I would suggest, for a radical re-evaluation of the effect of the inclusion in the novel of all these different languages, dialects, and voices, and the respective marginal communities they represent.

¹⁰ Gnutzmann describes and details a number of critical texts which adopt this position, and herself praises what she refers to as 'la heterogeneidad del lenguaje arltiano, choque entre voces vulgares y lunfardas, idiomas extranjeros, casticismos, el lenguaje científico y el lírico' (54).

Writing on the use of slang in the novel, Rita Gnutzmann defines slang in general as a 'vocabulario secreto' and a 'signo de diferenciación' (54). Yet it is a definition which can be taken further and applied to any language/dialect of a marginal group, the only difference being how far the speakers are conscious of its being a 'secret' and a 'sign of differentiation'. In this sense, then, the 'revealing' of the diverse languages in and by the novel can in effect be seen as repeating the revealing of secrets played out in the narrative, and can, moreover, thus be seen as having the same intellectual ramifications. In other words, far from being a heterogeneous linguistic space, giving a voice to marginalised (linguistic) communities, we come to see the text as a betrayal of those very communities, with the effects on them of their being revealed in the novel, the same as those we saw in relation to Silvio.

As happens to Silvio when he is 'revealed', when his self is voiced, the dialects and words of the marginal communities — and, hence, the marginal communities themselves — become common currency, mere signifiers, which, in their very revelation, in their very appearance outside of their context, that is, the singularity of the linguistic communities which are defined by them, forever hide their 'real' meaning, since the essential part of their meaning lay precisely in their being secret. Indeed, Silvio, early on, provides us with a highly pertinent allegory of this fact when he describes the money gained by the band of thieves saying: '*tenía para nosotros un valor especial y hasta parecía hablarnos con expresivo lenguaje*' (105, italics mine).

Within the marginalised (criminal) context, the '*billetes de banco parecían más significativos*' (105, italics mine), just like slang or dialectal words when used within their own marginalised groups. Outside of their defining, singular context, now opened up in and by the normal(ising) world of the novel, these words and voices are like money earned through normal work: the same 'banknotes', the same signifiers, but with their essence, their (secret) reason for being, tipped out: now in public circulation, their 'real' meaning and the essence of the communities they represent are forever lost, are more secret than ever.

Conclusion

The novel itself is revealed as a betrayal, as we see how the betrayal which ends Silvio's quest to 'stand out' from the sprawling cacophony of urban voices and experiences is linked inextricably to the novel's own disclosure of the marginal communities of that same urban reality. It acts to silence the marginal voices even as it vocalises them, to normalise them even as their marginality is affirmed, to make them absent even it presents them.

And therein lies its critical force. For *El juguete rabioso* is indeed a critique of, and a challenge to, 'literature' and 'literary texts', but not in setting itself up as an alternative, somehow more 'authentic', literature in its presentation of the marginal voices of the incipient modernity of the city, as has frequently been suggested.¹¹ Rather, it is precisely in revealing its own inevitable complicity as literature that the novel is so destabilising. Its challenge to the voicing of the marginal in the novel is one which it itself portrays as being impossible to take up successfully, for in staging its own failure, *El juguete rabioso* stages the ineluctable failure — and ethical impasse — of a literary voicing of the marginal *per se*.

¹¹ Despite affirmations by critics such as Gnutzmann that Arlt's literature reflects his search for 'caminos más « auténticos », más cercanos a la vida' (23), away from the traps of literature, the fact is that *El juguete rabioso* is inescapably part of the established literary canon: highly reminiscent of, if not directly based on, many literary works and genres, notably that of the *novela picaresca*, and, in particular, *Lazarillo de Tormes* (see Gnutzmann 24-29; 44-47 and Rufinelli, *op. cit.*, 375-78, for more on Arlt's literary influences for *El juguete rabioso*). The novel also in turn has informed the works of many later canonical writers: Borges' short story 'El intruso' in *El informe de Brodie* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial (Biblioteca Borges), 1997) is a very similar story of 'inexplicable' betrayal; Cortázar's short story 'La escuela de noche' in *Los relatos 4. Ahí y ahora* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1985) is a self-confessed variation on the robbery of the school library of chapter 1 of Arlt's novel; and the character Molina in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (Barcelona: Seix Barral (Biblioteca de bolsillo), 1993) is patently an adaptation of Arlt's homosexual character of chapter 3.